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AN

ETCHED PROFILE PORTRAIT

OF

WASHINGTON

By

JOSEPH HILLER

1794

By

CHARLES HENRY HART

SALEM, MASS

The Essex Institute

1907







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AN ETCHED PROFILE PORTRAIT OF
WASHINGTON BY JOSEPH
HILLER, JR., 1794.

BY CHARLES HENRY HART.

To the Historical Collections of the Essex Institute, Vol. XVI, p. 161, I had the honor to contribute a brief "Notice of a Portrait of Washington." The portrait there noticed was the etched profile made by Joseph Wright, in 1790, and at the period I wrote, 1879, we were in our infancy in the study of Washington iconography; indeed that "Notice" was my first important contribution, in print, to the subject. Since then I have published enough to have earned the illustrious name of "Washington," as a sobriquet, and while engaged in the preparation of my *Catalogue of the Engraved Portraits of Washington*, issued by the Grolier Club, New York, January, 1904, in a sumptuous quarto of 406 pages, I discovered in the cabinet of the Massachusetts Historical Society, an etched profile of Washington, which was new to me and evidently copied from the one by Wright, signed "J HILLER Jun^r Sculp^t 1794." In seeking the history of this print, I found, in the Proceedings of the Society, for February 12, 1874, (Vol. 13, p. 243) the following note;—

Mr. Brooks presented, in the name of Mr. A. H. Safford, of Cambridge, a pen and ink sketch of Washington, executed by J. Hiller Jr., in 1794. Mr. Safford's belief was that the miniature was presented by General Washington to Captain Thomas Hartshorn, of Reading, who died in 1819. It had been in Mr. Safford's possession for over fifty years, he having been a foster son of Captain Hartshorn. The drawing is sketched on the back of a playing card,—the ten of diamonds. The name of "George Washington" is inscribed on a scroll beneath the picture and beneath the oval, in which the picture is enclosed, is, "J. Hiller, Jr. scrip (or sculp.) 1794."

This note is a curiosity for its stupid errors. The profile was, of course, neither "a pen and ink sketch," a "miniature" or a "drawing," and there is not the least likelihood that Washington presented it to Captain Hartshorn.* It is what is technically known as a *dry point etching* and is *printed* on the back of a ten of diamonds playing card. I am saved from a minute description of the print by the impressions from the original copper plate which accompany this monograph.

As has often been said nothing can be claimed as unique that has emanated from the press, so, close upon the heels of this *find*, in the cabinet of the Massachusetts Historical Society, in Boston, I was sent by C. W. Darling, of Utica, New York, a reproduction of a similar etching, which he had given to the Oneida Historical Society, with this inscription ;

"Gen. Washington, 1794. The original of this portraiture, presented by Gen. Darling, Corresponding Secretary of the Oneida Historical Society, was given by an artist named J. Hiller, Jr., in 1794 to Harriet Paine,† then a young lady of sixteen. At a reception the artist took from his pocket a package of playing cards and on the back of the King of Clubs, began this sketch of Washington."

The errors of this inscription are as amusing as those already noticed, both of which are only fair examples of the romances that hang around so many portraits of the

*Capt. Hartshorn married Abigail Cleveland, aunt of young Joseph Hiller, and no doubt received the print from his nephew.

†The Cleveland and Paine families intermarried.

Father of his Country, which it has been my province and duty to correct and expose. From the two impressions of the Hiller etching of Washington I gleaned the information contained in my catalogue where the following description will be found on page 66.

“140 J. Hiller, Jr.

Bust, profile to right, in uniform. Title, on ribbon, below bust. Oval, of a single line, without background. *Dry-point etching.*

G. WASHINGTON/ J HILLER JUR^R SCULP^T. 1794/.

Oval height, 2. 9. Oval width, 1. 14.

This is an extremely close copy of the Wright etching, No. 138, but without a worked background. All the impressions that I know are printed on the backs of playing cards.”

A few months after the publication of my Grolier Club volume I received a communication from the Secretary of the Essex Institute, who wrote as follows :—

“A friend of mine and a member of the Essex Institute, has in her possession two interesting profiles of Washington, etched in 1794, by Joseph Hiller, only son of Major Joseph Hiller of Salem. The etching may familiarly be called card photograph in size and very generally resembles the rare etching by Joseph Wright. The Essex Institute owns a very beautiful seal, cut in London for Major Hiller and showing in profile the head of Washington. The etching by his son, I am inclined to think, may have been made for the purpose of sending to London a representation for the use of the seal cutter, for the portrait cut upon the seal and the etching are neraly identical. The etching, of which two copies are known to exist, is now in the possession of a descendant of Major Hiller and I am writing to you at this time, not only to bring to your attention this, to me, interesting portrait of Washington, but also to inquire in behalf of its present owner, if the two copies in her possession may not have a commercial value that may warrant the sale of the same.”

Here then were two more original prints of the Hiller etching of Washington and what is yet more remarkable

these two impressions were clearly what would be described, chalcographically, as two different states, the first and second. The lettering of the first state corresponded with that given in Hart 140, and of the second state, with the plate as it now exists. The differences are very slight, the only important change being the addition of "N 1", in the lower right corner of the margin. There are also dots or periods, ".", added after "Washington," "J", "Ju", and "1794"; and "Sculp^t", is "Sculp". I had the pleasure of disposing of these prints and now am able to communicate additional information relative to the Joseph Hillers, father and son, furnishing some interesting data concerning this early Massachusetts engraver.

Joseph Hiller, Jr., was born in Salem, Mass., June 21, 1777, and was drowned August 22, 1795, being washed overboard from a vessel off the Cape of Good Hope, so that he was only in his seventeenth year when he essayed the copy of Wright's etching of Washington. He was the fourth child, and only son, of six children born to Major Joseph Hiller (1748-1814) and his wife Margaret Cleveland (1748-1804). His father was a revolutionary officer who led "a uniformed company from Salem, on the day of the Lexington fight. The uniform of this company was quite elaborate and fully vindicates the truthfulness of Col. Trumbull's painting. It consisted of a green coat, white waist-coat and breeches, black gaiters, cocked hat with three black feathers and ruffles."* He saw active service in August, 1778, in Rhode Island, where he commanded a company of volunteers from Salem.† In 1784, he was appointed by the General Court of Massachusetts and commissioned by Governor Hancock, to collect the custom revenues at the port of Salem, which appointment was confirmed by commission from President Washington, August 5, 1789, as first Collector of the Port of Salem under the government of the United States. This office Major Hiller held until August 12, 1802, when he was superseded by President Jefferson and there hangs in the

*Rantoul's Port of Salem. Essex Institute Historical Collections, Vol. x, pt. 1, p. 65.

†Letter from Joseph Hiller to Major Sprague, dated "Camp before Newport, August 21, 1778." Essex Institute Historical Collections, Vol. xxi, p. 167.

Custom House at Salem, a portrait of him, painted from life, which was presented by his descendants. He is said to have been "the first American by birth who espoused the doctrines of Swedenborg." He was a Mason and admitted to Essex Lodge, January 25, 1780, elected Master, March 30, and re-elected under the new charter when the Lodge was re-established, July 5, 1791.* In early life Major Hiller was a silversmith† and jeweller‡ and was possessed of "great mechanical ingenuity."§ It was undoubtedly this last quality, with the taste that was naturally acquired from following the artistic trades of silversmith and jeweller, transmitted from father to son, that led the youth of seventeen to attempt the engraving of the Washington profile and doubtless the father, from his trade experience, was able to instruct his son in the mechanical part of his work, for in the early days every practical silversmith and jeweller understood something of chasing and engraving which were very important branches of their business. This plate, too, it will be remembered, is "dry-point etching"—engraved with the point and not bitten in with acid, and as far as is known is the only attempt of Joseph Hiller, Jr., at engraving. The supposition that this etching was primarily made, to be sent to England, for the use of the gem engraver, employed by Major Hiller, to cut in stone, at a cost of £20,¶ the seal, with the profile head of Washington, now in the cabinet of the Essex Institute, seems very reasonable. The profiles are as much alike as an intaglio cut in hard stone could be to a flat one engraved on soft copper, in addition to which they both face in the same direction, which would indicate copying without reversing, the easiest method for an ordinary copyist, and which reverses the head when impressed in wax. Nor is it too much a stretch of the imagination to conceive that the Wright etching copied by young Hiller, was the identical impression that belonged to

*Leavitt's History of Essex Lodge. Essex Institute Historical Collections. Vol. III, p. 123.

†Essex Institute Historical Collections. Vol. IV. p. 11.

‡Id. Vol. X, pt. 1, p. 65.

§Cleveland's Gencalogy of the Cleveland and Cleaveland Families. Hartford, 1899. Vol. I, p. 234.

¶Essex Institute Historical Collections, Vol. X, pt. 1, p. 66, states that the sum of £40, but living descendants name £20, as the correct amount.

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Benjamin Goodhue and which was the subject of my former communication to the Essex Institute. Stranger coincidences than this have happened and this is not at all an unreasonable supposition while it may be a hopeless one to follow to a satisfactory determination.

This story would be interesting enough if it ended here, but it does not and its sequel is quite remarkable. In May, 1906, I learned that the original copper plate of the Hiller etching of Washington was in existence. That it had been found lying upon a beam in the attic of an old house located on Turner street, in Salem, and although somewhat corroded, yet yielded a fair impression. Thus the past is brought up to the present and through the courtesy of its owner, Mr. Albert I. Whipple, the plate has been secured to illustrate this monograph, so that one hundred and thirteen years after its execution, restrike impressions from the original plate are published in the birthplace of the youthful engraver as a fitting memorial of him. Of original prints the four mentioned in the text are the only ones so far known.



WERT BOOKBINDING

JAN 1989

Grantville, PA

